

Knowing the winter birds.

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(1910)

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From The Outlook Magazine, Vol. 55, No. 5, Feb. 1910.





DEC 10 1921  
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- Outing Mag., Vol. 55, No. 8, N. Y., Feb. 1910.



AS THE DAYLIGHT PASSES, THE SHADOWS LENGTHEN STILL;  
THE SUN CREEPS SLOWLY DOWN BEHIND THE WESTERN HILL.



# KNOWING THE WINTER BIRDS

by Herbert K. Job

Author of "The Sport of Bird Study"

Photographs by the Author

UPON the approach of cold weather the woodchuck, dreading the sting of frost, shuts himself up in his stuffy burrow, to appear no more till the proverbial day when he is supposed to venture out to look for a sign of spring; even then, seeing his shadow, he may retire for another six weeks of poor ventilation. Curiously enough there are many people like the woodchuck in this regard, who think that winter is no time to be outdoors. Unless forced to an occasional exit, they are "shut-ins."

At best they but venture from house to house or for a short walk in a city street. The long "exposure" to overheated and ill-ventilated rooms and to the ravages of the sedentary life is a most dangerous ordeal, producing weakness and inviting the attack of disease. Winter is a glorious time for active exercise outdoors, in some respects even better than summer, and if an interest in the birds can provide an incentive to draw people to the wintry landscape and set them, now and then, to scouring the open, it will be sufficiently justified.

It must be admitted, however, that the scarcity of birds in winter in nearly all localities, save in the far South, tends to discourage many from the quest. Yet there are quite a number of species which winter even in the northern or middle districts, hardy creatures which are able to withstand rigorous conditions of temperature, storm, and scar-



PERCHED ON SOME CONSPICUOUS TREE  
IS THE RED-TAILED HAWK.

city of food. A wonderfully good idea of what birds are to be found in different parts of the country on a winter's walk can be gathered by reading in the January-February number of *Bird-Lore* each year the reports of the "Christmas Bird-Census."

The number of species seen by various observers in a day is usually from about six to eighteen, sometimes more—usually more on the coast, in the South, and on the Pacific Slope. At times, one will hardly see a living thing, but if one has acquired an interest in birds, their very scarcity will make the appearance of the few all the more welcome. The sight even of a single interesting individual under these conditions will give a feeling of pleasure more vivid than might be aroused by many a songster in May.

The birds to be seen on a genuine winter outing are not all the reward. There is a keen joy in ranging the leafless woods and looking through vistas



that are closed in the leafy season. Climbing steep hills is a keen delight, when the cold conduces to activity, and one is able to maintain a glow of warmth without being overheated. One can examine glittering cascades of ice, see the forms of the trees, and view miles and miles of country. All that is needed is an incentive to get us out, and the birds supply such an incentive in ample measure.

Before going far afield we shall do well to pay attention to the birds that come to our very doors, seeking food in the time of scarcity. The good custom of putting out food for the birds has now become very general. The insectivorous kinds enjoy a piece of suet, fastened in a tree. It is well to place it by a window where it can be watched readily.

In a mild winter, when food is easy to get, the birds may not use it very much, but let there come a heavy fall of snow followed by bitter cold, and they will be glad to accept our hospitality. In some severe winters I have had birds in numbers at my lunch counter almost constantly every day. Perhaps

most numerous will be the little black-capped chickadee, with his breezy manner and cheering songs.

Usually a very regular customer is the little black-and-white-spotted downy woodpecker. The hairy woodpecker, which looks just like his downy cousin, but is quite a bit larger, sometimes comes, but it is a shyer bird and generally less plenty. Another familiar friend is the white-breasted nuthatch, an exceedingly vivacious fellow, blue-gray above, with black or blackish crown, and white beneath, a regular acrobat who climbs like a woodpecker and is as apt to run headlong down a tree as up it. The saucy blue jay may also pay his respects.

The seed-eating birds do not care for the suet, so for them there should be a supply of seed or small or crushed grain placed out near house or barn in some warm, sheltered spot, with a cover above it to keep it from being buried under the snow. Unless the hordes of English sparrows can be kept away, they will monopolize the supply and drive off the desired visitors. The shotgun is the surest remedy, and it may be



THE DOWNY WOODPECKER WITH A PIECE OF SUET ON THE END OF ITS BILL.





PINE GROSBEAK DRINKING AT HIS WINTER FOUNTAIN.

said in the sparrow's favor that they are usually quick to take such a hint.

With the coast thus clear, the pretty tree sparrow is likely to be the most frequent guest, with numbers of juncos at times, and an occasional song sparrow. Sometimes on farms quail will feed around the barn in severe weather, but this is too good to be more than exceptional.

Our winter land birds may be readily thought of in three classes. First we may mention the species represented by some individuals at all times of the year, known as "residents." In a few cases, as with the ruffed grouse and the quail, the same individuals are found in one locality the year round.

With most of them, however, those found during the warmer season probably migrate southward, to be replaced by other individuals of the same kind from farther North. To this class belong the chickadee, white-breasted nuthatch, song sparrow, blue jay, and downy and hairy woodpeckers, already mentioned. Some others are the crow, meadow lark, goldfinch, and occasion-

ally the flicker, cedar bird, purple finch, red-winged blackbird, kingfisher, bluebird, and robin. Many of the birds of prey also belong in this category of winter callers.

The second class are birds nesting a little north of us and ordinarily migrating past us to the South, a few of which may linger for the winter in the Northern and Middle States. Of these the principal examples are the myrtle warbler, junco, winter wren, brown creeper, white-throated sparrow, and the two kinglets, especially the golden crowned.

To the third class belong those species from the far North that ordinarily come to us only as winter visitors. These are the snowflake, horned lark, Lapland longspur, tree sparrow, Northern shrike, pine siskin, redpoll, the red and white-winged crossbills, and the pine grosbeak. With these belong some Northern birds of prey such as the snowy owl.

It is well to bear in mind that various species of our summer birds are liable to constitute themselves members



of the first class by some bold or careless individual remaining or returning in actual winter. I have seen the fox sparrow and hermit thrush in December, and even such southerly birds as the cardinal and mocking bird have been found in winter as far north as Massachusetts. It adds interest to winter rambles to have an eye out for these unusual occurrences.

A number of these species in winter are found in flocks. In open fields, where various seeds can best be found, we may look for flocks of goldfinches, siskins, redpolls, snowflakes, and horned larks. The last two are larger birds than the others and are more terrestrial, often being found in company, and yet easily distinguished, since the snowflakes are so white. The first three more often cling to weeds to get at the seeds and alight on trees.

The goldfinch can be distinguished from the other two by its plain breast and black wings. The others have striped underparts, but the redpoll has a crimson patch on the crown and the adult males rosy-tinted breasts. The



THE CHICKADEE, WITH HIS BREEZY MANNER.



THE NUTHATCH IS AN ACROBAT OF SKILL.

cedar birds and purple finches also flock, as do the crossbills and the pine grosbeak, and to some extent the tree sparrows, juncos, and meadow larks, in straggling parties.

Some of the more Northern birds are very irregular in their appearances, sometimes not coming as far south as Massachusetts for years at a time. This is notably true of the pine grosbeak, the two crossbills, and the redpoll. Their coming is thought to depend more upon the food supply than on the weather. The winters when they appear are hailed with delight by bird lovers.

When we see in the evergreens or shade trees of the garden a flock of gray birds about the size of a robin, we at once surmise that the pine grosbeak has come. They feed a great deal on buds, ash, and maple seeds, and frozen fruit. The crossbills live largely on the seeds which they extract from the various evergreen cones—spruce, pine, and hemlock. Their mellow call notes, uttered



as they fly from tree to tree, thrill us with delight.

Another thrill comes when one approaches a flock of small birds feeding on weed stems projecting above the snow, thinking that they are goldfinches, and sees a crimson patch shining on each head—redpolls, from the very far north. But the flock, if not of the goldfinch, are more apt to prove to be the pine siskin, which is ordinarily more common than the redpoll, a heavily streaked little bird, with no color patch, and about the same size. Goldfinches, siskins, and redpolls all resort to trees as well as to open ground, especially along the edge of woods or in second growth, where buds, particularly those of birches, are a great attraction.

These wandering flocks of the va-

rious hardy Northern birds will bear careful watching, not only on account of their own peculiar charm, but because with them are sometimes found even rarer strangers. Any flock of redpolls is liable to include a specimen of the hoary redpoll, a much paler bird, which seldom comes as far south as the United States. The flock of common cedar birds sometimes has in it one or more of the rare Bohemian waxwing, which resembles the cedar bird, but is somewhat larger and has white wing bars and a black throat.

Snowflakes and horned larks often flock together, and with them one should always look for specimens of the Lapland longspur, a bird of about the same size and sparrowlike in appearance, with more or less black on throat and

breast and buff color on the sides of head and neck. Another not common bird which may accompany them or be found in their haunts, especially among the sand dunes and beach grass along the coast, is the Ipswich sparrow. It can readily be distinguished from all other sparrows by its very pale, bleached-out color.

When a supposed flock of pine grosbeaks is sighted, one may entertain the hope that they will prove to be the still rarer evening grosbeak. Once in a great while there will be a winter when this species comes in numbers across the Canadian border. It is a beautiful black-and-yellow or orange bird easy to recognize.



THE SCREECH OWL IS A COMMON WINTER BIRD THAT IS MORE OFTEN HEARD THAN SEEN.



The parrotlike crossbills are about the only ones of our winter-flocking birds among which we do not hope to find greater rarities; they are of sufficient interest in themselves as they climb about among the cones, using bills and feet like parrots.

If a flock of "blackbirds" is seen in winter, it may prove to be one of European starlings. At present they are mostly found from southern Connecticut to New Jersey, but they are gradually and surely extending their range. It is characteristic to see a large bunch of them clustered in the elms over a street and to hear a chorus of high-pitched, rather faint whistles. They also descend to feed in the streets and gardens, but are shyer than their imported predecessors, the house or "English" sparrow. Those who meet a "blackbird with a yellow bill" have found the starling.

One boreal fellow who, though he does not flock, deserves more than bare mention is the Northern shrike. If one should see a solitary gray bird with blackish wings and tail, nearly as large as a robin, perching on the topmost twig of some tree in open ground, this is the shrike or "butcher bird," waiting for the chance to pounce upon some sparrow or mouse. He is useful when he thus thins out the mice and English sparrows, but unfortunately he is just as liable to attack our chickadees, tree sparrows, and the rest.

If we live on the latitude of Maine



WHEN THE NUTHATCH LEAVES THE DINNER TABLE, IT IS AS APT TO RUN HEADLONG DOWN A TREE AS UP IT.

or northward we may add to our winter list the Canada jay, spruce partridge, and three woodpeckers—the arctic and the American three-toed, and the pileated. The latter is a big black fellow with a red-tipped crest, about the size of the crow and is not only a Northerner, but may be seen in wild wooded regions as far down as Florida.

Occasional hawks and owls make an interesting variation in the regular winter "bill of fare." A few individuals of various species stay in one place the year round, but most species either migrate or wander to some extent. Almost as steadfast as any are the great horned owl and the red-tailed hawk. Now and then we see one of these big hawks perched on some conspicuous tree in a field or along a road. It may,





A FLOCK OF PINE GROSBEAKS EATING MAPLE SEEDS IN THE DOORYARD.

though, prove to be the red-shouldered hawk, a bird with a darker breast and nearly as large, or, by good luck, the American rough-legged hawk or the goshawk, both rather scarce winter visitors from the North.

Sometimes these are quite common in winters when there is an influx of such birds as crossbills and redpolls, which they follow to feed upon. Occasionally one will meet the Cooper's sharp-shinned, and sparrow hawks. The great horned owl is most often started in deep woods, as are the barred and long-eared owls, medium-sized species, and the tiny saw-whet or Acadian owl. The latter and also the little screech owl sometimes take refuge from the cold in buildings.

Out on the open field or marsh one may run across the short-eared or marsh owl, or even the splendid white arctic snowy owl. In Canada one may also find the great gray, the Richardson's, and the hawk owls, and from the Middle States south the odd, monkey-faced barn owl and the turkey and black vultures, or buzzards. The "American" eagle may appear almost anywhere, and more rarely the golden eagle.

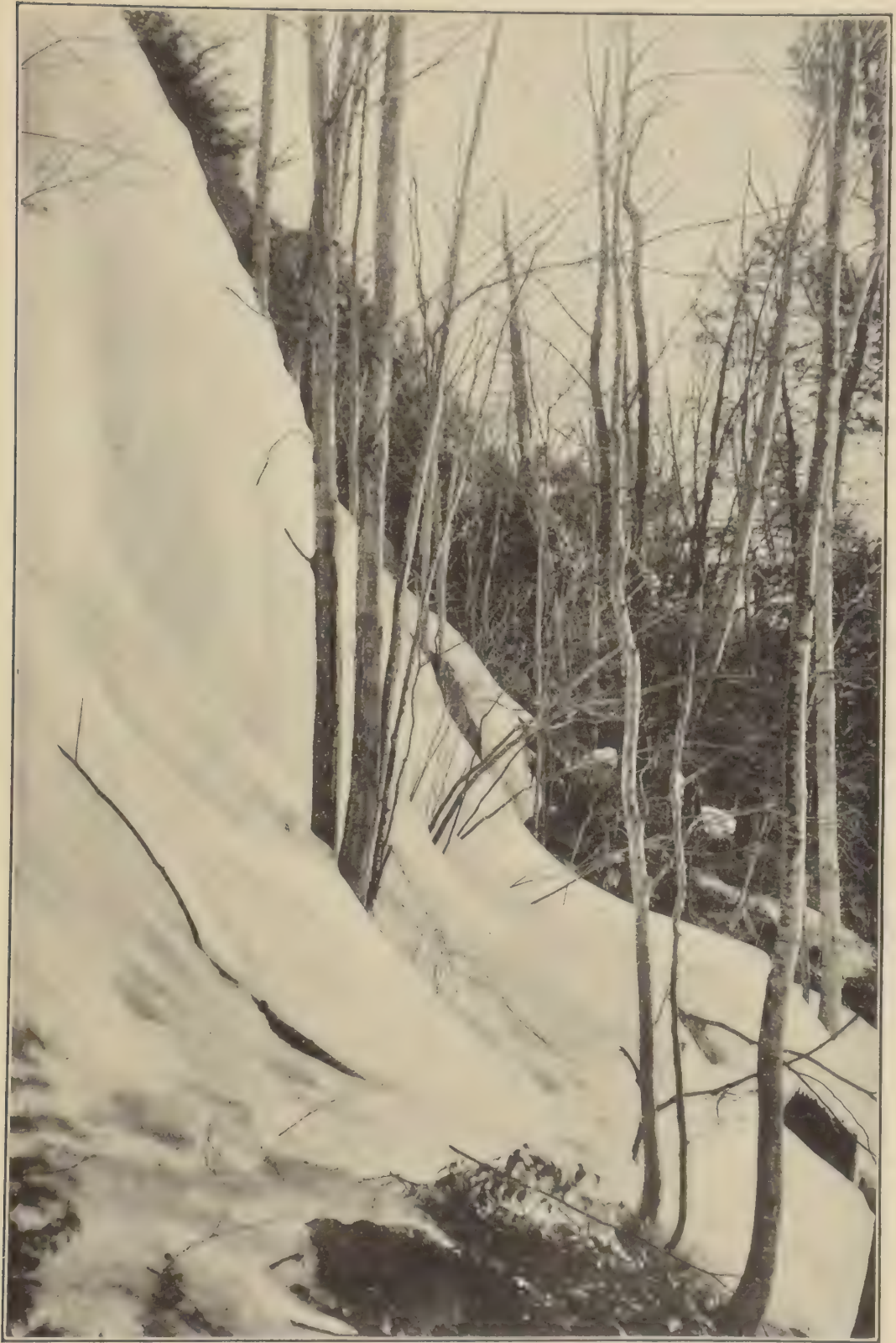
Inland the water birds are usually

scarce because the waters are mostly frozen. Still, the "black" or dusky duck often manages to find a living in the swamps, and the goosander or large "sheldrake" on rivers through openings in the ice. But on the coast there is quite a profusion of life. Various gulls winnow over the waters. Loons and grebes are swimming and diving. A number of species of marine ducks in flocks are careering about in striking formations, or else are on the water in "rafts" feeding or resting.

Especially from Chesapeake Bay southward there are hordes of the various wild fowl, and some shore birds, such as plovers, sandpipers, and snipes; while northward from Massachusetts we may find on the cold, wind-swept ocean such hardy birds as the auks, guillemots, puffins, gannets, and eider and harlequin ducks. Sometimes off Cape Cod during the Christmas holidays I have had a veritable feast for eye and soul in the abundance of these lively wild birds, so shy and innocent of civilization.

Southward, say from Washington, the typical land birds, in addition to some already mentioned, are such species as the cardinal, mocking bird, red-headed and red-bellied woodpeckers,





A WINTER HILLSIDE IN CONNECTICUT WITH ITS "GLITTERING  
CASCADES OF ICE."





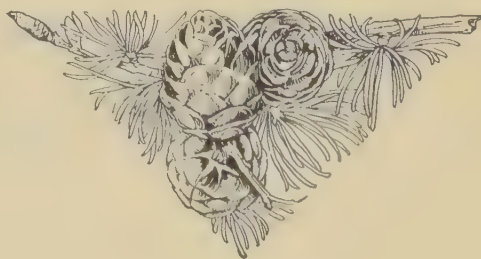
THE PRETTY TREE SPARROW IS LIKELY TO BE THE MOST FREQUENT GUEST  
IN COLD WEATHER.

loggerhead shrike, Carolina wren, tufted titmouse, and brown-headed nuthatch. A considerable number of our hardier Northern summer birds are also found. The frosts are only occasional and moderate, and the air is delightful—with all due respect to the biting, exhilarating northwest zephyrs of the snow-bound regions beyond.

When we get as far south as Florida, it seems like mockery to talk of winter. To be sure many of the birds have crossed the sea to Central and South America, yet there are many left. The little ground doves are so quaint, the jays, including now the Florida jay, so abundant and saucy, and the shore

birds, herons, ibis, and many water fowl so interesting—save as thoughtless tourists have exterminated them along the well-traveled routes, a crying abomination!

It is delightful to escape a month or so of the intense cold and wander through the orange groves, the pineries, the swamps, or by the tepid ocean, among the birds. Yet last March, after a month in the temperature of the eighties, when I returned home and filled my lungs with deep draughts of the delicious keen air which had been kept on ice for me, it did seem that never in my life had I so appreciated a blustering New England March.













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